The Goriška

Living with a multigenerational environmental complex trauma

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To be able to live in the environment around us, we need to be able to wear it comfortably. We need to feel that it belongs to us, and that we belong to it. This is not only a symbolic condition, but a bodily and emotional one.

What happened to Gorizia and Nova Gorica constitutes a form of multi-generational collective trauma, with effects comparable to those described in PTSD research, caused by the border and its political, emotional, familial, and personal repercussions.Despite many attempts and initiatives to suture that wound, and despite more recent successes in undoing part of the damage caused by decades of post-war border mentality - split families, split territories, broken habits - the situation was further complicated by the influx of non-locals.

This is not a value judgement, but a factual condition. Normally, places experience an influx of people who choose to be there; here, many people were relocated due to nationalistic, militaristic, ideological, and political decisions.

This territory has historically functioned as an area of *mezcla*, of *meticciato* - a place of exchange and overlap. This is, of course, a simplification, but a useful one for the sake of the argument. After the two wars, identity shifted from being an undercurrent to becoming the primary frame through which space was interpreted. Territory began to be understood less for its lived use and more for its identitarian value.

As a result, when it came to embodying their territory, both sides of the community were forced into a deeply traumatic process of rethinking their own native land. For locals and newcomers alike, the territory became something to avoid, to conquer, or to fear, depending on personal and familial histories.

These are not minor adjustments. Trauma research shows that while individuals may regain a degree of functional stability within a few years, deeper embodied trauma linked to war, displacement, and imposed borders often persists for decades and, when left unprocessed, is frequently transmitted across two or three generations, shaping behaviour, perception, and the ability to feel safe in one's environment for forty to eighty years or more.[1]

These traumas did not only change the texture of a small community; they fundamentally rewired how that community understands itself, the territory it inhabits, and what it perceives as possible or impossible. Small in size in very concrete terms, and therefore without the demographic, social, and cultural buffering capacity that larger metropolitan centres tend to have.

On top of this, migration into the area was rarely driven by desire or attraction, but by imposed necessity – military, economic, political, and ideological. In a larger city, such inflows might have been partially absorbed, diffused, or reworked through more complex and plural dynamics. In Gorizia, the scale was too limited for that. The pressure was absorbed but not processed. Instead of being integrated and transformed, it stagnated, layering one unresolved condition onto another.

The result was not integration, but accumulation: the community absorbed multiple unprocessed histories within a space that was simply too small to metabolise them, without any shared process, ritual, or even language to name what had happened.

The trauma was never properly identified or acknowledged and, as a result, remained largely unnamed. It became an integral part of local identity by default rather than by understanding. Identities formed around shoulder-shrugging, abrasive and often inappropriate humour, drinking, and other coping mechanisms that humans express through everyday behaviour and folklore – in the most literal, *volk* sense of the word. Rather than leading to emotional healing, the trauma was carried forward in fragmented forms that neither addressed the hyper-local

specificity of the problem nor allowed it to be consciously worked through.

At the same time, responses tended to prioritise external forms of economic normalisation – focused on growth, statistics, and numbers – while largely ignoring human, emotional, and relational needs. The result was continuity without repair: movement forward without resolution.

It is significant that Franco Basaglia operated mainly between Gorizia and Trieste. This territory offered particularly fertile ground for confronting forms of suffering that could not be addressed through confinement or individual diagnosis alone, but required social, spatial, and relational responses.

Seen from above, the original meaning of the Goriška becomes immediately clear. It is a settlement at the convergence of valleys - a point of communality, a market town, a place for trade and exchange. Not a place for borders, divisions, or rigid identity questions. The two wars transformed this locality into an almost *Deserto dei Tartari* type of place, where actions, gestures, words, habits, and ways of living had to be constantly censored, controlled, self-monitored, and often reprimanded.

I am from Gorizia, and growing up I could clearly see the signs of this wound within my own family: internal, unhealed trauma expressed through self-hate, drinking, and dogmatic, often unreasonable ways of decoding reality and the surrounding environment. These dynamics were not exceptional.

The Goriška is a wounded land, and it needs to be thought of in those terms. Any intervention, project, or vision must be approached not only through geography or statistics, but through the lens of generational traumatic events.

At times, it feels like living in a garden of forbidden fruits, where nobody ever explained that those fruits can, in fact, be picked. The rules remain internalised even when the conditions that produced them no longer exist.

This is why what the place truly needs is emotional healing. Not as a metaphor, but as a practical, shared process of relearning how to inhabit territory without fear, without self-censorship, and without inherited constraints.

I personally believe that places shape people.

And when people try to shape places, that is where things go wrong.

NOTES

[1] **On trauma duration and intergenerational transmission.** Clinical and psychosocial trauma research consistently distinguishes between functional adaptation and deep integration. Research in psychiatry and psychology shows that individuals may re-establish basic routines and social functioning within approximately three to five years following a traumatic rupture, while trauma connected to war, forced displacement, and political violence often remains embedded in the nervous system and bodily responses for ten to twenty years or longer, unless actively processed. In collective and border-related contexts, multiple studies document the transmission of unprocessed trauma across two to three generations, meaning that its effects can persist for forty to eighty years or more. This transmission occurs through behaviour, silence, coping strategies, and altered relationships to space and safety. Time alone is not sufficient for resolution; without conscious social, emotional, and relational work, trauma continues to structure how individuals and communities inhabit their environments.

- Trauma and Recovery, especially Chapters 1, 9, and 10, which outline recovery stages and the persistence of chronic trauma.
- The Body Keeps the Score, especially Chapters 4–6 and 13, documenting long-term embodied trauma and delayed integration.
- Bloodlines, especially Chapters 2–4, analysing transgenerational transmission of collective and border-related trauma.
- Transmission of Holocaust Trauma, which empirically documents second- and third-generation effects in families exposed to collective trauma.

AN IMPROVISED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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